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Voice, narrative and dialogue: the persistence of hunter-gatherer discourse in North America

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Introduction

The idea that hunting and gathering constitutes an ancient and distinct adaptation to the resource potential of an environment has energized writers as varied as Herodotus, Lewis Henry Morgan, Otis T. Mason, V. Gordon Childe and Julian Steward. The idea has held together sufficiently well to provide a title and common ground for the series of conferences on Hunting and Gathering Societies, in its eighth incarnation in 1998. As scholars and, more recently, aboriginal peoples have come together in the shifting foraging territories of the conferences, some of us have wondered whether our subject matter was rapidly disappearing, or indeed, whether 'pure' hunters and gatherers should be confined to the initial stages of unilineal evolution. Is our field of inquiry becoming less and less ethnographic and more and more like classical studies, as the economic and media forces of globalization reach previously remote places?

If we define hunting and gathering strictly in terms of subsistence technology practiced by people untouched by outside influence, it might be possible to argue, as Wilmsen (1989) did in his challenge to Lee, that even type-cases like the San were not true hunter-gatherers. This line of argument brings to mind an only slightly apocryphal story from recent Canadian legal history. In a case involving the demonstration of aboriginal rights by a First Nations group, lawyers for the crown asked a plaintiff about what foods she ate; fish, moosemeat, berries, grease - 'Yes'. Then came the clincher. What about pizza? 'Well yes, I eat pizza sometimes'. Voila! You can no longer claim aboriginal rights because pizza is not an authentic aboriginal dish. This argument has entered a folklore shared by participants in land claims issues as 'the pizza test'. The same principle was applied more heavy-handedly by the Canadian Government when, for a time in the nineteenth century, it automatically removed Indian status from any aboriginal person who received a university degree, on the grounds that 'educated' Indians were no longer real Indians. Since this chapter is about the First Nations hunters and gatherers of North America, I shall put the question in a form relevant to our concerns at the Conference on Hunting and Gathering Societies. Are aboriginal people from hunting and gathering traditions who eat pizza (or those who have law degrees or teach in universities or write novels or practice in the visual or dramatic arts) no longer authentically aboriginal? Must we relegate them to the status of former hunter-gatherers? My answer to this question is a clear, 'No'. Instead, I will argue in this chapter that people from North American hunting and gathering traditions continue to use aboriginal

modes of discourse and narrative as they negotiate relations within the larger society. But first, some background information.

Native American narrative technology

Although all technology may be viewed as being knowledge-based, the techniques which people in Native American hunting and gathering economies use to relate to one another and to their environment are particularly dependent on knowledge held by individuals and communicated through discourse and oral tradition. Hunting and gathering people, both men and women, maintain intimate physical and interpersonal relations with personified animals and natural features of their environment. Humans and animals are principal characters in stories that define their relations to one another. Their material world is also a storied world (Cruikshank 1990; 1998). Communication within a matrix of social relations that includes relations with animal people is central to the forces of production in a hunting and gathering economy.

A significant ecological fact of the hunter's environment is that animals live lives that are autonomous and independent from those of humans. The 'subject centered knowledge and skills' of hunter-gatherer epistemology, to use Ingold's phrase, (1993: 439), includes an understanding that animals are also willful and subjective beings. Hunting technology is based on the premise that, in order to be successful, the hunter must negotiate a relationship with his game. Relations with these beings are essentially interpersonal relations. Hunters may persuade and even coerce animals, but they do not own or control them as people do domestic animals in other economies. Animals behave as they do for their own reasons, not for the benefit of humans. Similar relations obtain between humans and personified natural forces.

Robert Brightman suggests that the Rock Cree of northern Manitoba have complex and sometimes ambivalent feelings about 'laboring thus to destroy their friends'(Brightman 1993: 196-199). Cree hunters alternate between what he calls 'benefactive' and 'adversarial' ideologies of hunting (ibid.: 199). The most commonly expressed benefactive ideology 'postulates an endless cycle of gift exchanges between humans and animals' (ibid.: 187). Hunters respectfully refer to animals as 'my grandfather' and 'my grandmother'. In this ideology, animals give themselves to hunters 'as the result of a deliberate decision' (ibid.). They give themselves because they 'pity' their human relatives. Humans reciprocate by showing respect in the way they treat the meat and bones: 'Hunter and prey are thus successively subject and object in an endless cycle of reciprocities' (ibid.: 187-88). An alternative to the benefactive model is an adversarial one in which hunters must overcome animals that refuse to be killed. To do this they invoke 'hunting medicine' (ibid.: 191) which is similar to other kinds of 'bad medicine' used to coerce humans into doing what their practitioners wish. Crees also liken 'hunting medicine' used to coerce animals to 'love medicine' used to coerce humans. In both cases, the relations between hunters and their game parallel those that pertain between human beings. In a review of Brightman's book (Ridington 1995), I suggested that rather than being contradictory, the two ideologies may be relevant to different situations. Compulsive measures are more likely to precede a hunt while

expressions of gratitude follow its successful completion.

Native American hunting and gathering technology is embedded in social relations that are enacted through discourse and empowered by narrative. Creation stories typically bring the world into being through discourse between beings who inhabit a world of beginnings. In a version of the common earth-diver story told by the Maidu of north-western California (Shipley 1991:18-19), Earthmaker refers to himself in the plural as 'we two'. In conversation with himself, he suggests, 'Well, you are very powerful to have thought this world into being'. He then extends his conversation as a song, directed to the land itself, 'Where are you, little bit of earth?' As the creation progresses, Coyote and Meadowlark join the conversation and through it, became agents of the creative process. Earthmaker thinks of other names, and these become other sentient beings including, finally, those of the human kind.

Empowering personal experiences, such as the vision quest, enact well-known narrative episodes. They come about through an individual's conversations with the powerful beings represented in traditional or mythic narratives. In my own work with the Dunne-za, I heard many stories about how parents send their children into the bush to receive power from an animal or natural feature of the land. In each case, the child is prepared for his or her experience, because the stories of these animals are part of a shared narrative tradition. In each case, power comes through conversation and shared knowledge.

An old man named Japasa told a story of his vision quest experience a week before he died in 1964. His son translated for me:

> My dad said he stayed out in the bush for twenty days. Ever since that time foxes have been his friends. Anytime he wanted to he could set a trap and get foxes. When he lived with the foxes that time he saw rabbits, too. The rabbits were wearing clothes like people. They were packing things on their backs. The first night out in the bush he was cold and wet from the rain. In the morning when he woke up warm and dry the wind came to him, too. The wind came to him in the form of a person. That person said, 'See, you're dry now. I'm your friend.' (Ridington 1990: 8)

Japasa gained power by establishing interpersonal relations with animals and natural forces. He entered into conversation with them. His story illustrates Brightman's benefactive ideology. Among the Dunne-za, the adversarial model seems to apply only in stories about mythic times when giant animals preyed on people. These stories tell about the culture hero, Saya, who uses his knowledge of the animals and their behavior to overcome them. Even in these stories, he interacts with the giant animals through conversation with them. He uses discourse as a weapon against them and ultimately directs their own power to accomplish their transformation into animals who give themselves to people. Rather than simply demolishing these powerful beings, Saya transforms them into the animals people know today. By killing them, he gives them new life, in the same way that the present-day hunter furthers the reincarnation of an animal's spirit by taking its body for the benefit of humans.

Okanagan elder Harry Robinson describes vision quest encounters among his

people as a form of discourse:

> You got to have power. You got to, the kids, you know. They got to meet the animal, you know, when they was little. Can be anytime till it's five years old to ten years old. He's supposed to meet animal or bird, or anything, you know. And this animal, whoever they meet, got to talk to'em and tell'em what they should do. Later on, not right away. And that is his power. (Robinson 1992: 10)

In one particularly fine story, Robinson describes how a boy is taken by his father and other hunters to obtain power from Shash-AP-kin, a stump standing in an avalanche gully. Its name means 'smooth stump', and through his encounter with it, the boy takes Shash-AP-kin as his own name. The power comes through the boy's conversation with his namesake:

> So the older people, his dad and his uncle and the others,
> they thought they going to leave him there by himself.
> Maybe some animal, maybe bird or something.
>   They might meet them.
> And talk to 'em.
> So he can be power man.
> They think - but they didn't tell 'em.
> (Robinson 1992: 26-27)

As the boy studies the stump, a chipmunk darts in and out of it. When he begins to poke at it with a stick, the chipmunk jumps out of the stump and becomes 'another boy, just like him' and begins to speak:

> You my friend.
> You boy, and I'm boy.
> We both boy.
> So it's better to be friends
>   instead of making fun out of me.
> Now, I'm going to tell you something.
> This stump - you think it's a stump -
>   but that's my grandfather.
> He's very, very old man.
> Old, old man.
> He can talk to you.
> He can tell you what you going to be.
> (ibid.: 29)

The old man then tells the boy the story of his life:

> You see me.
> You see my body.
> It was hit by the bullet for many, many years.
> Hit by the bullet.

That's why you could see, all smooth.
That's bullet marks.
And the bullet, when they hit me - the bullet -
they never go through my skin.
(ibid.)

The power of Shash-AP-kin is to resist bullets in the way that the stump has resisted falling rocks. As the story closes, the chipmunk, the boy and the grandfather sing a song together as an acknowledgment of their merged identity.

Robinson's stories, like those of the Dunne-za, use narrative technology to actualize relations of power between humans and the other sentient beings of their environment. Today, First Nations people live in an environment that includes people, institutions and material artifacts of contemporary society. They have been quick to adapt their narrative traditions to these realities. They continue to use dialogue to negotiate relations with one another and with other persons in the world surrounding them. For the purpose of this chapter I will include north-west coast peoples as well as subarctic, boreal forest, plains and plateau peoples as hunter-gatherers. The following are some accounts that aboriginal people have given of their relationships to the land and to the institutions of contemporary North American society.

Narrative technology and the law

Assuming that the adaptive strategies of Native American hunters and gatherers are embedded in dialogue and narrative traditions, I return to my previous question about how narrative serves contemporary members of First Nations communities. In addition to the continuing practice of narrative discourse within the confines of face-to-face communities, hunting and gathering people of North America have participated in a number of performance genres through which they seek to negotiate relations with the nation states within which they find themselves. Some of these have involved presenting themselves in courts of law. A classic case of representation and negotiation occurred when hereditary chiefs of the Gitksan and Wet'suwet'en First Nations of north-western British Columbia brought a court action against the provincial and federal governments to establish aboriginal title to their traditional lands. In an opening statement, Chief Delgamuukw told the court that:

> For us, the ownership of territory is a marriage of the Chief and the land. Each Chief has an ancestor who encountered and acknowledged the life of the land. From such encounters come power. The land, the plants, the animals and the people all have spirit - they must be shown respect. That is the basis of our law. (Gisdawa and Delgamuukw 1989: 7)

The chiefs went on to explain that oral traditions (*ada'ox* for the Gitksan, *kungax* for the Wet'suwet'en) are empowering stories that constitute title to traditional territories. The Wet'suwet'en described *kungax* as a 'trail of song' that links 'the land, the animals, the spirit world and the people' (ibid.: 30). The testimony that Chief Delgamuukw and

other First Nations witnesses gave before the court was a challenge to the language and premises of western law in that it asked the judge to consider the validity of alternative systems of law. In his trial judgment, Mr. Justice Allan McEachern limited his definition of aboriginal rights 'to the use of the lands in the manner they say their ancestors used them' (McEachern 1991: 15). He cited instances of contemporary Gitksan and Wet'suwet'en who had university degrees and employment in the teaching profession as evidence that these people no longer led an aboriginal lifestyle, and therefore had no claim to aboriginal rights within contemporary society. In other words, he invoked the infamous pizza test. The trial judgment was later appealed and some of McEachern's rulings were overturned.

Before that happened, though, members of the First Nations communities had an opportunity to express themselves in a conference organized to review the implications of the case. One of the participants, Wet'suwet'en Chief Dan Michel, spoke in a way that embodied the genre conventions of First Nations narrative. He described how, when he takes his grandchildren out hunting, he tells them:

> God created us to be what we are, an Indian. We belong to these lands. It would be like those animals - there's a horse and a cow, and it's impossible for a horse to try and be a cow. That's how it is if we're going to try and be a white man. We're not created to be a white man. (Cassidy 1992: 62)

Chief Michel went on to describe the importance of what his grandfather had taught him about the land and its animals:

> I met up with the grizzly bear about six or seven years ago. It just came back to me what my grandfather said about this great animal. He said, 'When he is coming at you, don't get nervous or excited. Just face him. He wouldn't run over...you.' I remembered that, and as soon as I remembered those words, I was so calm. I wasn't even nervous. I had my gun ready and trained on him. I let him come just as close as these first row of seats. That's when he stopped. (Cassidy 1992: 64)

He followed this story with another about encountering a grizzly bear with some officials from the Department of Fisheries:

> I said, 'Have you ever seen a grizzly bear go fishing?'. They said, 'No.' 'Well, again, it was given to him by the Creator. That grizzly bear has got his right to go fishing the way he was supposed to do. Nobody tells him how to fish. If you see a grizzly bear out fishing, do you give the grizzly bear a permit to go fishing?'. They said, 'No.' 'So therefore you don't need to give me a permit. I go fishing when I need to go fishing.' (Cassidy 1992: 65)

Chief Michel's story applied the teaching of his grandfather to his relations with government officials. The story uses metaphor to demonstrate that his relationship with the grizzly stands for an overall relationship his people have to their ancestral lands. I was witness to his presentation and observed its impact as an oral performance first hand.

In another case (Apsassin v. The Queen) the Dunne-za and Cree of the former Fort St. John Band claimed compensation for breach of trust in the sale of reserve lands known in the Dunne-za language as *Tsu nedzi gedgi*, 'the place where happiness dwells'. Lawyers for the plaintiffs identified 'the problem of discourse' as a key to their argument. By this they meant that the judge would have to accept and understand the discourse of First Nations witnesses, some of whom did not speak English. In a paper about the trial I wrote:

> The oral traditions of people who are native to this land are a form of discourse that connects them to the land and to the generations that have gone before. Their discourse has given them a highly developed form of government that is different from our own. Their discourse honors individual intelligence rather than that of the state. Their discourse also demands a responsibility to...past generations, to the land, and to generations as yet unborn. Their discourse honors and enables both individuality and social responsibility. (Ridington 1990: 190)

Despite the inability of the trial judge to accept First Nations discourse, the plaintiffs pursued their case through to the Supreme Court of Canada. There, they won a favorable judgment, and subsequently they were able to negotiate a final settlement of $C147 million. In an interview on CBC Radio the day the settlement was announced, former Chief Gerry Attachie said:

> I first got involved, I became a councilor in 1974, and in '76 I became a chief for both band, Blueberry and Doig. And I, all along in the past, the elders were talking about the surrender and something not right there according to them, and so I look into it and then one day I set a meeting with the Indian agent in Fort St. John, and from there, that's how it started. And he told me he think there's a case here for both bands, so it's long time ago. I believe we had a good case and about 1945 when the surrender took place, mineral rights were not mentioned. It was forgotten. It was a mistake, I believe. It's been really tough. We struggle. We travel lot and then both bands, and we, mostly we get these elders involved on it and we travel lot. The sad part is most, quite a few of them we, pass on since the last twenty years. Some young people too, and but we have to get on with it, I guess. I learn a lot. And one of these days I hope I'll do, I'll write a book. (Attachie 1998)

In both the Delgamuukw and Apsassin cases, First Nations plaintiffs approached Canadian courts using narrative and discourse from their own traditions. They asked the judges involved to accept aboriginal systems of law and government based upon narrative and oral tradition. While both cases were unsuccessful at their initial trials, both achieved some measure of success in the Supreme Court of Canada which ruled in Delgamuukw that oral tradition should be accepted as a demonstration of aboriginal title (Lamer 1997: 3). In Apsassin, the same court ruled that the Doig and Blueberry First Nations did have cause to receive compensation for the loss of mineral rights in the former reserve. The lengthy court proceedings have themselves entered the oral histories of these First Nations.

Narrative technology, pizza and contemporary performance genres

Native American oral narratives are highly dialogic and therefore highly novelistic in their genre conventions. The novel is a living form of expression, according to literary critic Michael Bakhtin. He writes, 'Life by its very nature is dialogic. To live means to participate in dialogue' (1984: 293). It is not surprising that a number of First Nations writers have chosen to express themselves in the dialogic genres of novels, short stories and drama. Aboriginal oral tradition is particularly resonant with postmodern literary forms. Native American literature has become strong and relatively well-known in the years following the pioneering novels written by D'Arcy McNickle in the 1930s. Writers whose work embodies Native American narrative traditions include Louise Erdrich, Leslie Marmon Silko, Gerald Vizenor, James Welch, N. Scott Momaday, Jeannette Armstrong, Tomson Highway, Sherman Alexie, Eden Robinson and Thomas King.

King's *Green Grass, Running Water* (1993a) is particularly close to the genre conventions of Native American oral literature in its use of voice and dialogue, and presents a strong case against the pizza test of aboriginal authenticity. King gives full credit for the voice he uses in his novel to Okanagan storyteller Harry Robinson (King 1993b). King himself is of Greek and Cherokee descent, and his work is informed as well by the time he spent listening to Indian stories when he was Director of the First Nations Studies Department at the University of Lethbridge. The novel is, among other things, King's reading of North American literature, literary theory, Native American history, and popular culture through the images and genre conventions of American Indian oral tradition. King's characters include Blackfoot university professors and four old Indians named The Lone Ranger, Ishmael, Robinson Crusoe and Hawkeye who turn out, the reader discovers, to be First Woman, Changing Woman, Thought Woman and Old Woman in disguise. The book is a pastiche of episodes in which each story contains something of every other story. The narrative voice of Coyote holds the stories together: he plays the roles of contrary, trickster and even god. Using his own authorial voice in counterpoint to the contrary voice of Coyote, King presents a Native American perspective on the American literary and cultural canon.

As with any Native American creation story, King's novel begins with conversation; in this case, Coyote in conversation with his own dream as well as in conversation with the author.

> So.
> In the beginning, there was nothing. Just the water.
>
> Coyote was there, but Coyote was asleep. That Coyote was asleep and that Coyote was dreaming. When that Coyote dreams, anything can happen.
> I can tell you that.
>
> . . .
>
> That Coyote Dream makes many sad noises, and those noises are loud and those noises wake up Coyote.

> 'Who is making all that noise and waking me up?' says Coyote.
> 'It's that noisy dream of yours,' I says. 'It thinks it is in charge of the world.' (King 1993a: 1)

Like Robinson's *Shash-AP-kin* who appears as boy, chipmunk and grandfather in conversation with one another, and like the Maidu Earthmaker in conversation with Coyote and Meadowlark to create the world, King's characters actualize power through conversation. While King's characters converse with one another, his novel as a whole engages in dialogue with the entirety of shared Indian-white history. As King put it in an interview with Peter Gzowski on CBC Radio, he wanted to

> recreate the world along more Native lines, and use Native oral stories - oral Creation stories - rather than the story you find in *Genesis*...to sort of drag that myth through Christianity, through Western literature and Western history, and see what I came up with - sort of push it through that, that *grinder*, if you will, as Native culture's been pushed through that sort of North American grinder. (King 1993b: 70-71)

King currently writes and performs with two Cree actors in a weekly fifteen minute radio show on the CBC radio network, ironically called 'The Dead Dog Cafe Comedy Hour'. The show uses contemporary comedic dialogue to convey serious messages about the essential qualities of aboriginal experience and narrative tradition in the modern world. The characters include two Crees, Jasper Friendly Bear and Gracie Heavy Hand, as well as Tom King as himself. From time to time, Jasper and Gracie exchange asides in Cree, which only other Cree speakers would understand. The overall effect of the show is to illustrate that anything Indians experience is authentic Indian business. Some of that business is biting social commentary and criticism from a First Nations perspective. Regular features include 'The Captain Dead Dog Award' for exceptional corporate greed, interviews with real 'famous Indians' about what they do when they are not being famous, a roulette wheel that generates 'authentic Indian names' for people who write in to the show and readings from 'ten reasons why it is good to have Indians in Canada'. King has also photographed a number of famous Indians wearing Lone Ranger masks, which disguise and transform them in the same way that First Woman of Indian myth appears in the book disguised as The Lone Ranger. In Thomas King's Indian Country, the mysterious 'masked man' and pizza are both authentically Indian.

Humor and irony are also highly developed in the work of contemporary Canadian First Nations visual artists such as Carl Beam, Bill Powless, Gerald McMaster, Shelly Niro, Lawrence Paul and Jane Ash Poitras. Their work embodies what Allan J. Ryan, citing Carl Beam, calls 'the trickster shift'. This shift embodies 'the re/creation' of Indian identity as an active participant in the contemporary world' (Ryan 1999: 13). A typical work is McMaster's ironic painting entitled, *Shaman Explaining the Theory of Transformation to Cowboys*. The image is of four impressionistic cowboys in silhouette facing an abstract horned skull set above a triangular body drawn after the fashion of rock art shamanic figure. The title, written across the bottom of the painting, sets the viewer's

mind in motion as much as the image itself. The artist says of his work:

> What I did there was to show the incongruity. The life of a cowboy is generally quite profane. Cowboys sit around the campfire and sing songs. The notion of intellectual conversation and bantering isn't really there. It's fairly simple. On the other hand, scholars and Native peoples and so many others have tried to understand what a shaman is and nobody can. We get an idea of what he does and who he is. It's so complex a field - to begin to understand what a Native person is as represented by the shaman. (ibid.: 33)

Like King, McMaster plays transformative games with the popular stereotype of cowboys and Indians. In another painting, *Counting Coup*, he shows a Plains Indian chief in full-feathered war bonnet pointing a pistol at a blue-shirted cavalryman. Out of the pistol's barrel hangs a flag on which is written, 'BANG!'. The soldier has a look of consternation and confusion. The caption below the painting reads, *All Plains Indian tribes shared certain types of coup, yet each held its own views as to special ones.* Ryan says of this painting:

> The artist examines cross-cultural misunderstanding in the Old West evoking, then reversing, the standard scenario of the stock Hollywood western. In a whimsical update of the old cultural maxim - or is it ethnographic observation? - lettered on the painting itself, the clever Indian chief outsmarts the not-so-clever cowboy-*cum*-captain-*cum*-bumbling fool. The deed is registered here in Cinemascope framing and captured in Technicolor hues. (ibid.: 23)

Ryan notes an obvious parallel between McMaster's cowboys and those who appear in *Green Grass, Running Water*:

> In a similar fashion Cherokee author Thomas King...has a quartet of Trickster-like characters enter a video of an old Hollywood western and fix the ending so that the Indians triumph over the confused cavalry. (ibid.)

Another popular Native American writer is Sherman Alexie. His *Reservation Blues* (1996) plays out the story of what happens when legendary African American blues singer Robert Johnson shows up on the Spokane Indian Reservation. Like King's novel, Alexie's shows how contemporary Native American experience brings together a wide range of cultural influences. His Indians not only eat pizza; they form a blues band called Coyote Springs. The novel is rich in dialogue and irony, and reads very much like the kind of oral narrative that continues to be heard in First Nations communities today. Alexie's characters are sharply drawn. Each one is distinctive in the way that individuals are in small Native American communities. Alexie says of himself and other Native writers:

> We are more than just writers. We are (Native) storytellers. We are spokespeople. We

are cultural ambassadors. We are politicians. We are activists. We are all of this simply by nature of what we do, without even wanting to be. (Alexie 1998)

Alexie has also written the screen play for a highly acclaimed 1998 film, *Smoke Signals*, which was directed, acted and produced entirely by Native Americans and based on his book, *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* (Alexie 1994). The film is particularly successful in its use of humor to show the viewer that authenticity and contemporaneity are not mutually exclusive. For instance, Plains Indian contraries appear in the movie as a pair of women driving a beat-up reservation car that only goes in reverse. The allusion would be obvious to insiders familiar with the traditional role of the contrary, but would be just an amusing piece of whimsy to an outsider. Similarly, a healing goddess from mythic tradition appears in the film as an Indian Health Service nurse.

A passionate and articulate proponent of Native American discourse is Jeannette C. Armstrong, a novelist, poet and director of the En'owkin International School of Writing in Penticton, British Columbia. As a native speaker of her Okanagan language, Armstrong has tried to achieve an English prose form that does justice to the thought patterns and imagery inherent in Okanagan. 'Times, places, and things,' she writes, 'are all made into movement, surrounding you and connected to you like the waves of a liquid stretching outward' (Armstrong 1998: 190). She consciously uses English syntax and vocabulary to evoke the Okanagan sense of movement in her novel *Slash* (1985). She cites the opening lines of the book's epilogue as an example:

> Tonight, I sit up here at the Flint Rock and look down to the thousands of lights spread out in the distance where the town is creeping incessantly up the hillsides.
>
> Across the Okanagan valley the sun begins to set. Blazes of mars-red tinged with deep purple and crimson brush silvery clouds and touch the mountain tops. The wind moans through the swaying pines as coyotes shrill their songs to each other the gathering dusk. Long, yellow grasses bend and whip their blades across cactus, sand and sage. (Armstrong 1985: 253)

Armstrong suggests that even 'Okanagan Rez [Reservation] English has a structural quality syntactically and semantically closer to the way the Okanagan language is arranged' (1998: 193). The Okanagan stories told in English by Harry Robinson to Wendy Wickwire illustrate this point (Robinson 1989; 1992), as does the Robinson influenced dialogue in Thomas King's work. 'Okanagan reality and that of other Native Americans', Armstrong writes,

> is very much like a story: it is easily changeable and transformative with each speaker. Reality in that way becomes very potent with animation and life. It is experienced as an always malleable reality within which you are like an attendant at a vast symphony surrounding you, a symphony in which, at times, you are the conductor. (Armstrong 1998: 191)

In Okanagan storytelling, she goes on to say, 'the ability to move the audience back and forth between the present reality and the story reality relies heavily on the fluidity of time sense that the language offers' (ibid.: 194).

This distinctively aboriginal quality of moving the audience back and forth between present and storied reality helps explain the tricks and transformations of authors such as Alexie, King, Highway and others. Every story does contain every other story. Coyote and pizza can exist within the same narrative. Rather than being contaminated by Robert Johnson and the Lone Ranger, aboriginality thrives upon these additions to the storied universe. Harry Robinson's creation stories contain references to white people precisely because these people are part of contemporary Okanagan experience and need to be explained. The literary devices commonly associated with postmodern literary forms turn out, in fact, to have been fundamental to First Nations oral literature all along. In a paper about *Green Grass, Running Water* called 'Coyote's Cannon: Sharing Stories with Thomas King', I wrote that:

> Episodic interrelated vignettes performed by a knowledgeable narrator are typical of traditional Indian oral literatures. Tom King's work is neo-premodern, not postmodern...People who lived before the 'modern' era obviously did not think of themselves as premodern. We can recognize a resonance between ourselves and people who never experienced the modernist agenda. Tom King plays upon this possibility. His Old Indians are premoderns held captive by American modernism, but they are also the thoroughly anachronistic Thought Woman, Old Woman, First Woman and Changing Woman. Their time transcends our own and circles back to touch it. By masking them in the icons of modernism, King reveals himself to be a neo-premodernist. (Ridington 1998: 360, 362)

As Julie Cruikshank argues in *The Social Life of Stories* (1998: 3-4), First Nations storytellers 'use narratives to dismantle boundaries rather than erect them' while at the same time constructing 'meaningful bridges in disruptive situations'. While Cruikshank traces Yukon narrative deconstruction to disruptions of the nineteenth century, I think she would agree with Armstrong that Native American storytellers have always moved their audience between present and storied realities. In a very real sense, the listener has always shared authorship with the narrator; the symphony has been one in which at times, 'you are the conductor' (Armstrong 1998: 191). Thomas King makes a similar point when he identifies the 'I' of his novel as the reader who becomes the storyteller (King 1998, personal communication).

Conclusion

While hunting and gathering as an adaptive mode of production ultimately brings about a range of distinctive expressive forms, it would be premature to say that these forms must disappear as soon as contact is made with another system of production. Real Indians do eat pizza, write novels and make films. Indeed, the genre conventions of Native American hunting and gathering cultures adapt remarkably well to the conditions

of postmodernism. Narrative technologies that helped people negotiate relations with the non-human persons of a natural environment can be adapted to the purposes of negotiating or at least articulating relations with the institutions of nation states. Aboriginal people of North America have been successful in presenting themselves to courts of law and to courts of public opinion. Through an astute combination of honesty and irony, they have made themselves known in law, in literature and in the graphic and performing arts. Native literature is becoming widely read and respected as a worthy challenge to the western canon. Who knows? After the Osaka conference, the Dead Dog Cafe may offer sushi as well as pizza.

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